

## Day 354 by kaahiescheck

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**Summary:** Her eyelids were getting heavier and heavier. "You can sleep, it's okay," he told her. "Stay?" "Of course I'll stay." "Promise?" "Promise." / Or what happened after El closed the gate.

## Day 354

Been looking for a filler for right after El closes the gate. As it usually happens when I'm not happy with what I've found, I sit on my butt and crack my brain to write one instead. I stan Mileven and I will go down with this ship (their fluff is more towards the middle and end of the fic).

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A discussion was going on in the kitchen. Mike couldn't be bothered to pay attention, but he'd gathered it had something to do with the fact that Steve needed more ice and couldn't get any because there was a Demodog in the fridge.

Also, Max's stepbrother had groaned a couple of times from his place on the floor by the corner. Maybe he needed another shot.

Also also, nobody else was back yet.

He paced the living room, ignoring his slightly aching ankle, restlessly fiddling with his hands. Lucas had tried to get him to sit down a couple of times, but had eventually left him to it. They were worried as well, Mike knew, so there was no point in arguing.

As soon as he heard tires outside, Mike ran to the window – as did everybody else – only to find it wasn't a Blazer truck. He got out of the house anyway to wait in the porch. Nancy opened the car doors to everyone as Jonathan carried what could only be Will wrapped in a blanket, his mother following closely behind.

"Is he okay? Did it work?" Mike asked.

Mrs. Byers smiled genuinely. "He's gonna be fine."

He must have made a face at his unconscious body, because Jonathan rushed to say. "He was just tired."

They followed inside as Jonathan put his brother to his bed. Mike quickly walked around the bed to sit on the other side, Dustin and Lucas coming after him. As Mrs. Byers rearranged the blanket over

Will, he stirred and blinked.

"Hey," the mother said, "don't say anything. You're home now. You're safe."

Slowly, Will turned his head and spotted his friends. He attempted a smile. "Hey."

Mike's face broke out in a grin. "You saved us."

It looked like Will might protest, but the color drained from his face when he tried to speak again, so Mrs. Byers made him close his eyes and try to sleep. "When you wake up, we'll get you something to eat."

From the corner of his eye, Mike caught Steve shooting Dustin a look.

"Yeah, about that, Mrs. Byers..." Dustin started.

He didn't even need to finish for the woman to sigh deeply. She didn't ask for clarification, merely shook her head, partially amused. Then she frowned. "Who... Whose was that car in the driveway?"

This time, Steve looked at Max, who blushed when everybody turned to her. Mike tuned out then. He was fidgety. Studying Will from up close, he could tell a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders, even if he was deadly pale and already snoring quietly. So that was one thing he could check off his list. Now that left...

Dustin, Lucas, Max, and Steve filled out of the room. Nancy stayed for a moment and took a seat next to Mike. She offered him a tired smile, which he returned. He didn't know where his sister had been. All he knew was that she and Jonathan had, for some miraculous reason, shown up with a car as they were escaping the lab, and she looked like she hadn't been home for at least a day.

"I was worried, you know," she said. "Couldn't find you anywhere. Why do you always have to disappear like that?"

"Demogorgons."

She pulled him into a hug, at an awkward angle since they were both sitting, and Mike let her squeeze him a bit. "I'm gonna call mom and

make up some excuse so we can stay, okay?"

"Okay."

With that, she left the room as well, and Mike returned his attention to a sleeping Will. Even as he tried to empty his mind, he was worried out of it and couldn't keep still for the life of him. He looked up at the littlest sound.

"Oh, honey," Mrs. Byers said from her place holding her son's hand. She gave Mike an understanding look. "You can wait in the living room. We're okay here."

But he didn't want to leave Will. He frowned his indecision, still restless.

"The chief told me they were on their way as we were driving here," Jonathan commented from the armchair.

There was a pause. "And you just forgot to mention?" Mike questioned, eyes wide and his voice raising. He then felt bad, because Will was sleeping and he needed his rest. Jonathan did look guilty, at least.

"Will's not going anywhere," Mrs. Byers continued in a calm manner. "It's okay. You can go. She'll be waiting."

Mike hesitated, but it was no use. He was up in no time and back to the living room, checking the window every thirty seconds. Time stretched by and he was feeling sicker by the minute.

"You don't think it was like last time, right?" he wondered out loud to his friends. "Like, how she destroyed the Demogorgon *and* herself and got stuck in the Upside Down? What if she closed the gate and got stuck there?" he stopped and turned to face them on the couch. "With it? And she couldn't make a portal back?"

"He really is always like this," Max said lowly to Lucas. "How does one function—?" At Mike's glare, she looked away. "Sorry. It's probably nothing."

"The lab isn't far," he argued. "They should've got here already."

Nancy walked up to him. "Look, it hasn't been that long yet."

"Speak for yourself."

"It could be something as simple as she's feeling nauseous and the chief's driving slowly to make her more comfortable."

It *could*, but it didn't stop him from worrying. He had lost her once, for almost a year, and they hadn't had a moment to themselves before she'd had to go save the day again. He couldn't go through all of that one more time. And he should have definitely kissed her, even after Hopper had called.

He was *this close* to literally being sick with worry when the faint sound of a motor reached his ears. He perked up like a dog and shot towards the door, throwing it open and immediately spotting the car's headlights in the distance. He wanted to run to it, to do anything to get her to him faster, because he couldn't see inside and he needed to know if she was there. However, he forced himself to stay on the porch.

At least until the truck was (almost) parked. Then he was on the move.

The headlights were turned off at the same time he reached the passenger's side's window. And she was *there*. She had her eyes closed, bruises on her face, dried blood under her nose, but she was *right there*.

"Breathe, kid. Gotta get her out first," Chief Hopper said as he made his way over.

Mike didn't wait. He pulled the door open and stepped forward in case he'd need to hold her. Without the window (and looking closer), he could see how truly bruised she was and his heart gave a painful squeeze. "What happened to her?"

"Exhausted."

With a gentle hand on his shoulder, the chief quietly asked him to step aside, which he did, reluctantly. Mike followed as he carried her inside the house, following Mrs. Byers's instructions to put her in her

bed. As soon as he did, though, Mike kneeled next to it and leaned close to her, reaching for her hand.

"Is she okay?" Dustin asked from somewhere behind him.

"It just took a toll on her," Chief Hopper answered. "She was awake for the first minute of the car ride. Where's that boy Harrington? I need some help to get Dr. Owens out of the car."

*There was another person in the car?*

The voices faded around him as Mike studied El's face – her beautiful face that he hadn't seen in a year. She looked so peaceful, even with the bruises. The makeup around her eyes was almost completely gone. Her hair was trying to curl against the gel that held it in place. Her eyelids fluttered. There was a slight cut in –

Hang on.

"Eleven?" he called.

She scrunched up her eyes for a moment before slightly opening them, little by little. "Mike?"

"Yeah." His voice nearly failed him. He squeezed her hand tighter and she flexed her fingers in response. "Are you okay? What are you feeling? Are you hurt?"

"Okay," she whispered.

Hopper leaned over him to look at her. "Hey, kid. We made it. Just rest, all right? And I'll be right back. Stay with Mike."

She managed a slight nod and the chief was gone. Then she was back to staring at Mike just as much as he was staring at her. The corner of her mouth twitched as though she was trying to smile. "I closed the gate."

Mike felt his own lips curling up. "Of course you did. I knew you could do it."

"The... Demodogs," she pronounced the word slowly. "Ran away.

When we got to the gate."

"Yeah, that's on us." Her frown was very cute, but it demanded an explanation. "We went into the tunnels and set fire to this, like, main area to draw them away from you. Then we got the hell out of there and came back."

El was processing the information, forehead still scrunched up. "You went to the Upside Down?"

"To clear your path so you could do your thing. I couldn't just sit here and do nothing."

She was out of words (which wasn't uncommon), but her face was as open as he'd ever seen it. Every emotion she tried to convey to him, he sent it right back to her – *thank you for saving me, I'm so glad you're alive, I'm so glad you're here with me.*

Her eyelids were getting heavier and heavier.

"You can sleep, it's okay," he told her.

"Stay?"

"Of course I'll stay."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

A while after she gave in and let sleep overtake her, Hopper came back into the room. He just looked at her for some time. Meanwhile, Mike made sure not to loosen his grip on her hand and already had a speech planned in case he tried to kick him out. It was not negotiable.

"It was a huge-ass gate, she's gonna take some time to recover," Hopper commented as he took a seat by El's feet.

Mike just nodded, never taking his eyes off her. He knew the chief wasn't finished.

"You know, she was amazing out there, even with those dogs everywhere. But funny thing, Wheeler – they all just walked away when we reached the gate. Does that seem odd to you?"

His question compelled Mike to return his gaze. He stayed silent, not feeling guilty about what he'd done but not particularly in the mood for discussing it. He wondered if Steve had told him about it.

Hopper nodded in El's direction. "You should get some sleep as well. It's been a long day."

"I'm not leaving."

He could see it in his eyes, the conflict. On one hand, there was positively no way the chief could convince Mike to leave her side and go sleep elsewhere, and they both knew it. On the other hand, there was also positively no way he'd let him sleep in here in bed with her.

Mike thought he might have been staring a bit too begrudgingly, because Hopper sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Look. Kid. I'm sorry. There's nothing more I can say to you. I didn't want to keep you two apart. It was for her safety as much as yours."

"You lied to my face."

"Yes."

"I called her. I called her *every day* and she *heard* and you didn't let her tell me that she was okay."

"I know."

"Do you have *any idea* how –"

"How much it hurt? Yeah. D'you think it was fun to watch her mope around the place and yell at me and cry all night because you said you had a bad day and needed to hear from her?" Mike looked away, but he kept going. "D'you think it was fun to explain to her that I didn't know when 'soon' was for her to see you? It sucked. For everyone, not just you."

Mike didn't move.



"But I'm sorry, all right?" the chief repeated. "And just because I feel bad, Imma let you stay with her. *On the armchair*," he added when Mike made to get up. "And I'll be right down the hall."

Mike made a face at him, as if to say *What do you think we're going to do?* He decided not to push his luck, though, and crossed the room to get said armchair, dragging it back to his previous spot. He made himself comfortable and took El's hand again.

Hopper got up and stretched. "I gotta talk to a bunch of parents to explain why their kids aren't sleeping at home tonight. Let me know if she wakes up, all right?"

"Sure."

As he walked out, the chief left the door open halfway, and – again – what did he think they were going to do? He turned off the lights as well, leaving just the bedside lamp on casting a soft glow in the room.

Suddenly, Mike's eyelids were too heavy to keep open, and he leaned on his arms in the bed, next to El's hand clasped in his.

Next thing he knew, his back was killing him and his mouth felt like the Sahara. And someone was shaking his shoulders. He blinked a couple of times in the light coming from the windows and turned halfway around – okay, that hurt like a bitch – to find Nancy.

"Breakfast's ready."

He blinked again. "What time is it?"

"Ten something. Everyone's in the kitchen. Well, Jonathan's taking Will's breakfast to him in bed, but apart from that –"

"Not hungry," he shook his head and rested it against his forearms again.

"Mike," she sighed. "You have to eat something."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you *do*. C'mon," she shook his shoulder.

"No!" he turned to her, annoyed that she was insisting. She was surprised at his outburst at first, but she deflated as he did. When he spoke again, it was in a soft voice. "I promised her I'd stay."

Nancy pursed her lips for a moment. Her eyes traveled from his face to his hand in El's and she nodded. "I'll bring you something."

She came back with a plate of delicious food and a tall glass of water, which he drained instantly, then she left him be. Mike was sad to let go of El's hand, but he had to if he wanted to eat, and, *man*, did he want to eat.

When he was finished, he put the plate on the nightstand and turned back to her. She hadn't moved since she'd fallen asleep. And, God, her hair had grown so much. He was guessing it was a bit curly, because of the few strands getting loose at the back of her neck, and he wanted to touch it. So he did, going for the part with the least amount of gel.

His left hand returned to hers, as though magnetically pulled, while his right one softly stroked the bit of her hair that was loose. Even as he sat there, seeing her, touching her, she didn't seem real. He was afraid he'd blink and she would disappear, everybody telling him he'd been hallucinating (because, honestly, that wasn't so out of the question). He wanted to grab her and take her home, back to her fortress in the basement.

She twitched her nose and he held his breath, afraid of waking her. A moment later, she raised her shoulder and tilted her head to the same side where his hand was. Slowly, she blinked her eyes open.

"Good morning," he said softly.

El met his eyes, but she did the thing with the shoulder and head again, squirming a bit. "It..."

Mike frowned, unsure of what she wanted to say, and she herself seemed to be looking for the word. It was only when she squirmed again and his hand got a bit crushed that he realized he was still

moving his fingers in her curls, sometimes brushing her neck. He stopped at once. "Oh, it tickles?"

"Tickles?"

"Yeah, like..." He moved his fingers against her neck and she had the same reaction. "Like that. Tickles."

The smile that had appeared on her face turned gentler and he couldn't help but mirror it. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay."

"Well, great!" He noticed the bruises on her face had almost completely disappeared during the night. "But you can sleep more if you want. It's fine."

El shook her head. "I wanna stay. With you."

Slowly and without releasing his hand, she tried to sit up against the headboard. She was weak, though, and he had to let go to help her. Once he did, he took a seat on the bed by her side, facing her. He wasn't sure if Hopper would approve of him being so close, and he had asked to be called when she was awake, but Mike wanted her with him alone for just a bit more. God knew when they were going to have the opportunity again.

"Your hair's grown," was the first thing that came out of his mouth.

El smiled shyly. "You like it?"

"Yeah. I mean, you're pretty either way, but yeah. Absolutely. Very pretty."

She reached out for his hand. "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I missed you."

The way she said it set a shock through his body, in a way he pretty much had no air left to respond, "I missed you, too, El. So much."

"I visited you, almost every night. I wanted to talk to you, but he didn't let me."

She looked so sorry, begging him to understand it wasn't her fault, as if he'd be mad at her over it. He'd told the chief – he didn't blame her. She probably had no other choice. He didn't want what was worse: not knowing if the other was even alive, or knowing the other was alive but worried and not being able to reassure them.

"It's not your fault," he told her. "None of this was your fault."

El still looked unsure. "You're not mad?"

"Of course not. I'm just glad you're back. I'm so, so glad you're back," he grinned.

The half-smile she gave him melted him completely. He nearly broke down right then, crying in her arms. He had felt physical pain when she was away, thinking of all the things he could have done differently to save her. All the things he should have said to her.

He felt himself leaning in. When he was almost too close to bear, he stopped and searched her eyes. Her answer was to close the distance between their lips. It was soft and quick, but it lingered. To try and calm his heartbeat, he leaned his forehead against hers. She closed her eyes, but he kept his wide open and on her and, eventually, she reopened hers too.

They stayed like for a while, hands intertwined, breaths mingling, staring and making sure the other was real. Unfortunately, though, Mike knew he'd be dead if the chief found them like this, so he pulled back when he gathered enough strength.

"You hungry?"

El nodded.

"Can you stand? Or I can bring you something?"

"It's okay."

Very slowly and with his help, El got to her feet – even if she had to

lean her head on his shoulder for a bit for the spots in her eyes to disappear. It was fine because he got to hug her again. When she had her bearings, he led her out of the room. They entered the kitchen with her leaning on him, although Mike wasn't one hundred percent sure she actually needed it, and she ate her breakfast with her chair as close to his as she could. He had to hide a grin throughout the whole meal.